



Fox, A. (2017, Sep 29). Looking at the Carpet from the Wrong Side: Albertine Fox on writing Godard and Sound.

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

License (if available):
Unspecified

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the final published version of the article (version of record). It first appeared online via ALLIANCE OF WOMAN FILM JOURNALISTS at awfj.org/female-gaze/2017/09/29/looking-at-the-carpet-from-the-wrong-side-albertine-fox-on-writing-godard-and-sound-exclusive/ . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

[AWFJ blogs »](#)[About The Female Gaze](#)[Explore The Female Gaze »](#)[Contact The Female Gaze](#)

Posted by **awfj-admin** on Sep 29, 2017 | **0 Comments**

In her biography of the art critic and painter Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf makes much of the 'perpetual need' for the critic to look at art objects from new angles. Unpredictable and erratic in his approach, Fry 'looked at the carpet from the wrong side; but he made it for that very reason display unexpected patterns.' I have written a book called *Godard and Sound* that offers an alternative perspective on Jean-Luc Godard's later films through an analysis of their rich soundscapes. At the same time, it develops an aural-inspired approach to thinking and writing about film, setting off from the simple but liberating premise that our relationship with film changes when we listen, and it's the twofold nature of my book that brings me to write this article.

BEGINNING WITH MARGUERITE DURAS

I came to the topic not by way of French New Wave cinema but after writing a dissertation called *The Sound of the Image* that explored the role of sound, music and voice in the experimental cinema of the French writer and filmmaker Marguerite Duras. Duras's ingenious idea of using the entire soundtrack from one of her films as the soundtrack for another was a powerful way of coming to understand the political implications of the radical disjunction of voice and image in cinema. In her film *India Song*, the offscreen voices and auditory renderings of alienation and intimacy undermine traditional patriarchal cinema's restrictive scopic regime, bringing the spectator into contact with other, more ambiguous forms of pleasure and suffering, and with a different model of feminine subjectivity which I found deeply inspiring. Having grappled with the untapped freedoms that come from analysing sound in films that don't abide by narrative conventions, I became enamoured with the disruptive and unpredictable soundscape of Godard's *Weekend*, and with the subtle levels of repetition and variation in his earlier feature *Vivre sa vie* (*My Life to Live*). I was also struck by the emphasis on listening and memory in his later film *Éloge de l'amour* (*In Praise of Love*), by the sensuous blending of music and speech in *Passion*, and by the subversive use of speed variation in *Sauve qui peut* (*la vie*) (*Every Man for Himself*).



WOMEN WRITERS, MALE SUBJECTS

It's true that each chapter in my book is devoted to the work of a well-known and extensively written about male filmmaker, who is widely considered to be one of the monumental greats of European cinema and whose films appear to have been analysed and criticised from every possible angle. It's also true that on a personal note, I don't always readily identify with the 'characters' in Godard's films, at least not in the usual sense, but I have found this to have been an extremely instructive experience precisely because of the challenges it has posed. The films, videos and soundtracks I discuss involve me in other ways, for example, through the sonic and visual relationships that appeal to my sensory sensitivities.

Godard's films and videos have given rise to an impressive corpus of criticism by women writers, critics and film theorists (Susan Sontag, Pauline Kael, Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Nicole Brenez, Céline Scemama, Miriam Heywood and others). They have also inspired future feminist scholars to take up film studies (Judith Mayne) and future greats of European and feminist cinema to make films (Chantal Akerman). There have also been important interventions into traditional Godardian criticism that have helped to shift the emphasis

An Alliance of Women Film Journalists blog.

get email notification of new posts

Subscribe



Search



- ▶ Looking at the Carpet from the Wrong Side: Albertine Fox on writing *Godard and Sound* (Exclusive) September 29, 2017
- ▶ *Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard*, Excerpt from Chapter Five (Exclusive) — Albertine Fox September 29, 2017
- ▶ New Zealand's Maori Women Talk WARU — Gill Pringle reports from TIFF September 16, 2017
- ▶ Meet Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari, director of 'Nil Battey Sannata' ('Zero Divided by Zero') and 'Bareilly Ki Barfi' (Bareilly's Candy) — Interview by Mythily Ramachandran September 10, 2017
- ▶ Meet Soundarya Rajnikanth, director of VELLAI ILLA PATTADHARI 2 — Interview by Mythily Ramachandran (Exclusive) August 10, 2017
- ▶ Pamela Yates talks 500 YEARS and Career Commitments (Exclusive) — Jennifer Merin interviews July 7, 2017
- ▶ Filmmaker Interview: Directors Sabine

from Godard's status as auteur to a filmmaker committed to collaborative practices which are difficult to define or describe. This provides scope for a different understanding of the form and content of his collaborative audio-visual creations, especially those he made with his partner Anne-Marie Miéville (his main collaborator from the mid-1970s to the present). It should continue to be stressed, however, that the films Miéville has made as a solo artist are yet to receive the distribution and serious critical attention they deserve.

GENDERED SUBJECTIVITY

Whilst my book is not concerned with gender issues per se, my non-traditional, experimental and personal approach is influenced in transitory ways by my gendered subjectivity and personal sensibility. During a crucial debate held in 1978 called 'Women and Film: A Discussion of Feminist Aesthetics', **B. Ruby Rich** proposes the intriguing idea that all filmmakers, whatever their gender, superimpose their own image on top of their subject. Although by no means a given, if the filmmaker is a woman and a feminist, there is 'the possibility for a reinforcement, a doubling or enlarging of the subject, by virtue of her superimposition of her own like image'. She notes that there is even potential for feminist filmmakers working within an established tradition to launch an 'intervention into that tradition just by the force of that kind of vision', so 'on the level of sympathy with, and representation of, the female subject.' If the critic or scholar is a feminist, there is also the possibility for a reinforcement of the female subject, just as there is still the potential for undertaking feminist work by way of the kind of sympathy and attentiveness that Rich describes.

As I was writing *Godard and Sound*, I did not link my study directly to a feminist project, yet the possibilities that Rich outlines certainly resonate with my attraction and attentiveness to creative and transgressive female subjects who are all inextricably linked to sound, hearing and vocal expression. I was drawn to the off-beat movements and aural receptivity of the character Denise (Nathalie Baye) and to the voice of writer and filmmaker Marguerite Duras in *Sauve qui peut (la vie)*. The musicalized speech of the non-compliant factory worker Isabelle (Isabelle Huppert) in *Passion*, and the singing voice of Catherine Ringer in *Soigne ta droite (Keep Your Right Up)*, also feature centrally in my analysis of each film. My section on Godard's King Lear elevates the sonic-spatial significance of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* in the film, and I interpret Woolf's presence as being the primary artistic force that displaces Shakespeare's play and prevents Cordelia's silent resistance to authority from undermining itself. The uncomfortable level of sonic distortion that we hear throughout the film, immerses spectators in a form of poetic expression that disturbs rationality and logical thought and values listening as much as words.

FEMALE ANALYSTS

The female figures that have shaped portions of my analyses are themselves doubled by the secondary dialogues I establish with theoretical and literary texts by women scholars, musicians and writers, comprising Deborah Mawer's studies of Ravel's music, Carolyn Abbate's theory of the 'unsung voice' in opera and instrumental music, Woolf's diaries and essays, the writer and storyteller Claire Bartoli's typographic response to the sound of Godard's *Nouvelle vague*, and the thought of Georgina Born, whose work I discovered late in the research process but whose theorizing has greatly expanded my grasp of sound and spatial thinking. Whilst it is easy to fall into the trap of essentialism here, I believe it is nevertheless important to highlight the range of sources by women writers and scholars, on which my book draws for specific aesthetic and theoretical reasons. This is especially pertinent in view of the book's offering of an alternative method of film analysis that hopes to reach a broader audience than more traditional academic and critical approaches to film (and to Godardian scholarship) would allow. This is vital in a film culture where contributions by women (whether as directors, producers, screenwriters or critics) are frequently ignored or dismissed as non-serious, reflecting the ongoing gender stereotyping, and the limited roles and behaviours that women are permitted to display as thinking subjects, within the patriarchal culture of the wider society. In terms of the subject matter itself, my overriding commitment has been to make a space in film analysis for the listening subject, and this endeavour is helped by my understanding of film spectatorship as an interactive, spatial and auditory practice that I call 'acoustic spectatorship'. Additionally, the emphasis I give throughout the book to the notion of 'acousmatic sound', which is usually described as a sound that one hears without seeing its source, is due to the enormous creative and imaginative potential it offers. It is not the idea that we can't physically see the worldly cause of a sound that interests me most about the acousmatic condition. Rather, it's the level of uncertainty and ambivalence it generates through the distortion of causal relations. As the composer Linda Dusman has highlighted, acousmatic sound's subversive potential also shows itself in the 'making present' of the listener's body in a public setting.[1] This is because, typically, in acousmatic performance, the human performer is absent and a loudspeaker takes its place, deflecting the audience's visual attention onto a non-human object. Complicating notions of 'natural' and 'unnatural' musical experience, acousmatic sound provides a powerful sonic means of illuminating other binary oppositions upon

- Krayenbühl and Zeva Oelbaum on LETTERS FROM BAGHDAD June 8, 2017
- ▶ AWFJ EDA Award @ DOXA 2017 Filmmaker Interview: Heather White on COMPLICIT May 12, 2017
- ▶ AWFJ EDA Award @ DOXA 2017 Filmmaker Interview: Jessica Kingdon on COMMODITY CITY May 12, 2017
- ▶ AWFJ EDA Award @ DOXA 2017 Filmmaker Interview: Rawane Nassif on TURTLES ARE ALWAYS HOME May 12, 2017



- ▶ Campaigning for Gender Equality
- ▶ Defining the Struggle
- ▶ Just for Fun
- ▶ Networking and Sisterhood
- ▶ Survival Tactics
- ▶ Uncategorized
- ▶ What Is the Female Gaze?
- ▶ Women's Career Moves



Select Month 

which existing power structures and systems of privilege depend. Just by engaging in attentive listening, our preconceptions are challenged and we are compelled to find ways of making sense of the world outside of simplistic categories of experience. A greater awareness of the aesthetic possibilities of acousmatic sound could lead to more aurally-sensitive debates about film that might change our understanding of how sound in cinema can be used to affirm or destabilise a constellation of social norms.

EXPANDING AESTHETIC AWARENESS

Renewed efforts to expand aesthetic awareness and revise the everyday terms we use to review and analyse films remains an endless and necessary task. Questioning our understanding of the very notion of 'the visual' in film, as something that operates in opposition to 'the sonic', might be a good place to start. In film criticism, auditory perception is rarely prioritized in the way that visual perception is, and yet when we attend a film screening, our attention is not necessarily dominated in a directional sense by the pull of the visuals. It is often the sound that guides our visual (and non-visual) focus. Giving more emphasis to the activity of listening and to the ways in which the spectator shapes and is shaped by the sonic construction of a film, offers a wealth of other ways of thinking and writing (about) cinema, allowing a more diverse set of critical responses to emerge.

Whilst Godard's films are renowned for being inordinately difficult and understood by very few, this repeated complaint supports the idea that there is one fundamental destination toward which we are all striving, and which will eventually reveal the true meaning behind the oddities and the terrible confusion. And yet our anxieties over intelligibility often fall by the wayside when we begin to listen to a film beyond its 'message', beyond what it might be 'telling us', and when critical narratives attuned only to sight are plunged into chaos. As I became immersed in the sound world of Godard's films, each tumultuous experience made me physically aware that listening is never a closed affair but an open-ended process that throws up new questions and insights each time it begins.

SOUND MARKETING

In a world drowning in marketing proficiency, the fear of plummeting viewer ratings and drops in profit due to the risk of championing non-established, unconventional, or underrepresented voices are clearly specious justifications. In a film industry where women are underrepresented at every level, listening could prove to be an invaluable mode of female agency and an enduring tool of resistance against limiting gender representations, especially in a culture where specific forms of vision are (still) used to sustain patriarchal control. Listening could be thought of as an instrument capable of revising and reshaping the dominant narratives of film history and theory, as well as reworking the ocular-centric and gendered ways in which 'vision' itself is often presented. Listening could be used to disrupt prejudicial discourses that depend on the idea that knowledge and truth are acquired through sight, while the sound of another's voice and the more elusive process of listening are deemed to be of little significance. The level playing field continues to be sought and obstacles must continue to be overcome, not only from the bottom up or top down but from sensory angles and subjective positions that show up new patterns of thought and feeling, enabling the wrong side of the carpet to be heard as well as seen.

[i] Linda Dusman, 'No Bodies There: Absence and Presence in Acousmatic Performance', in P. Moisala and B. Diamond, *Music and Gender* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), p. 339.

ABOUT ALBERTINE FOX

Albertine Fox is a Lecturer in French Film at the University of Bristol. Her work has appeared in *Studies in French Cinema*, *SEQUENCE* and in *Sight & Sound* online. She is currently working on a project that explores the role of interviews in films and documentaries, with a particular focus on works by French and Francophone women filmmakers.

Godard and Sound: Acoustic Innovation in the Late Films of Jean-Luc Godard by Albertine Fox will be published on 30 November 2017 by I.B.Tauris: eBook edition available on publication but hardback copy pre-order is available from Amazon. Read an **exclusive excerpt** of the book on THE FEMALE GAZE.



explore: [albertine fox](#) | [feminist perception](#) | [jeanluc godard](#) | [margurite duras](#)

[awfj home](#)

[awards intelligencer](#)

[cinema citizen](#)

[eye on
media](#)

[i scream you
scream](#)

[the week in
women](#)

[\(more blogs to
come\)](#)

Designed by [Elegant WordPress Themes](#)